

Thomas Paine Was Not a "Filthy Little Atheist"

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Miss Best Shows the Author of "The Age of Reason" as a  
Much Calumniated Idealist

THOMAS PAINE, PROPHET AND  
MARTYR OF DEMOCRACY. By  
Mary Agnes Best. 413 pp. New  
York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. \$3.50.  
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THE career of Thomas Paine affords an excellent illustration of man's inhumanity to man. Miss Best, in her excellently conceived "Thomas Paine: Prophet and Martyr of Democracy," has put forward an analysis that is both a biography and a defense. Paine, for decades, has suffered under the dark cloud of misrepresentation and foul attack. His motives have been twisted, his teachings perverted, his character blackened and his place in American history belittled. He has been called a drunkard and a lecher, a filthy little atheist and a bombastic boaster. Miss Best, by a careful examination of original sources, has scotched the majority of these insulting accusations, and the reader of her book will see Thomas Paine, perhaps for the first time, through eyes that are both impartial and kindly. They will see an idealist of Quaker tendencies who did more than any man of his time to rouse and concentrate the patriotic fury of the Thirteen Colonies during the American Revolution. They will see a born revolutionist of the moderate type who helped shape the constitution of the French Revolution, who fought valiantly to save the life of the ill-fated Louis XVI, who passed eleven months in the foul prison of the Luxembourg, who was persecuted and ignored by the American Tory, Gouverneur Morris; who wrote "The Age of Reason" in the shadow of the guillotine, and who was maligned and shamed in a thankless Republic (our own) during his last years.

What are the reasons for this obloquy that has been heaped upon Paine? There seem to be two of them. English hatred which used every method to blacken the character of the man who despised tyranny, and the onslaughts of Calvinists and conservative Christians, who found "The Age of Reason" no less than the inspiration of the devil. For the rest, there was little to go upon except such minor peccadillos as the untidy litter of papers among which Paine lived, his addiction to brandy during the French Terror, when he was despondent in spirits and felt that all that he had fought for had crashed to earth; his excessive love of snuff, the vanity of his old age that expressed itself in much talk concerning his past successes, and his inveterate self-confidence.

The misrepresentation of Paine is mainly due to inspired articles and even biographies, works that were consciously written to belittle the man. Observing his life apart from the detractions of his enemies (as Miss Best does), one notes that he was a hard-working, courageous, public-spirited idealist whose unalterable purpose was the betterment of mankind and whose whole career was marked by an unextinguishable love for his fellow-beings. He landed in America in 1774, a penniless Englishman who had already impressed Benjamin Franklin with his gifts, and from the beginning of the War for Independence he was heart and soul with the Continental forces. He was a fighter as well as a propagandist, for he was on General Greene's staff, but his great feat during the Revolution was the pamphlet "Common Sense," and the various issues of "The Crisis," works in which he combated British propaganda, heartened the Colonists, and offered indestructible arguments for the creation of the United States of America. He was honored by Washington, Jefferson, Monroe and Madison. During a troublous period when the Atlantic seaboard was torn by dissension and doubt he flung "Common Sense" into the mind of the day like a thunderbolt. The arguments in that work spread like wildfire, and it was from these arguments that the Republic sprang. Paine convinced hundreds of wavering minds, whipped them into a sturdy attitude, heartened them during the dark days of Valley Forge,

and kept always before them the objective of a free Republic. After the war, in a letter inviting Paine to visit him, Washington wrote:

"Your presence may remind Congress of your past services to this country; and if it is in my power to impress them, command my best services with freedom, as they will be rendered cheerfully by one who entertains a lively sense of the importance of your works, and who, with much pleasure, subscribes himself, 'Your sincere friend,'

"G. WASHINGTON."  
It was not Washington's habit to subscribe himself anybody's "sincere friend" unless he meant it.

Paine, however, had his detractors, and his work during the Revolution was dimmed by them as he grew older and made enemies because of his free views on religion. There is no more damning indictment of a man than the chapter in Miss Best's book which concerns Gouverneur Morris's treatment of Paine during the French Revolution. Morris was American Minister to France and Paine, an American citizen, was rotting in a prison. Morris, a Tory at heart and dazzled by the lost corrupt life of the court, appears to have been, perhaps, one of the most dishonest men who ever represented this country abroad. He conspired against the nation to which he was accredited and he poured the vials of his hatred on poor Paine, who represented so many things that he detested. It was not until Morris ceased to have an official position in France and Monroe took his place that Paine was released from the cell wherein his health was broken irretrievably. Before this episode Paine had been one of the leading figures in the French struggle for freedom. He had stepped into the conflict believing that it would be a revolution of moderate and restrained minds, a triumphant overturning of an old order much as it had been in America. He abhorred violence, and when the bloody Reign of Terror ensued and the "sea-green monster" Robespierre controlled the fates of men, he was lost. He, with his Quaker blood and inclinations, could have none of this. He believed in liberty and equality and, as a last alternative, he would accept war; but the wholesale decapitation of the nobility was something that he could not stomach.

Thomas Paine.

From the Engraving by William Sharp After the Painting by George Romney.



When Paine was clapped into the French prison he had just finished the first part of "The Age of Reason." This is the work that caused him to be regarded as an ogre in so many quarters, and yet when we read it today it does not seem to be so fearful. It is certainly an attack upon the Bible, an expostulation against accepting the ferocious God who destroyed His own people. But Paine was not an atheist. He believed in a God, although he refused to picture that God as the God of the Christians, the Mohammedans or any other sect. He protested against what man has made of God and the ridiculous dogmas that obscure the face of the true God. However, his attitude spelled his ruin. The later years found his fame darkened and his character besmirched. The late Theodore Roosevelt, for instance, called him a "filthy little atheist." Miss Best calmly points out that Paine was five feet ten (some inches taller than the twenty-

sixth President), that he was rather elegant in dress and manner, and that he was not an atheist. Outside of these three errors, Mr. Roosevelt made no mistakes in his summing up of Paine. One does not need to lust on "The Age of Reason," however, as the epitome of Paine. There is still another work and one that is still a best seller today. That is the "Rights of Man," which Paine wrote in defense of the French Revolution and for which he was outlawed in Great Britain. James Madison declared that this work was an exposition of the principles on which the United States was founded. It is still a book that may be read with profit, for portions of it are universal in their argumentation, and Paine was the simplest and most straightforward of writers. In this sense, he was a born pamphleteer. He could carry conviction to the dullest. He did not need to embroider or to enlarge. Indeed, Miss Best might have made more of a point of studying

Paine's prose and his methods of structure than she does, inasmuch as the mind of the man is assuredly implied in the way he wrote.

Paine died in 1809 in New York City in a house occupying what is now 59 Grove Street. During his last years, notes Miss Best, he excited as much interest as the wild man from Borneo or the bearded lady. People came just to stare at him. Miss Best quotes from "Forty Years' Residence in America," by Grant Thorburn, an episode that reveals the curiosity of the public in Paine. The worthy Thorburn, "a 'blue-skin' Presbyterian psalm singer," crashed his way into a room where Paine was talking with some friends, and demanded:

"Gentlemen, is Mr. Paine in this room?"  
"My name is Paine."  
"Mr. Paine and you gentlemen, will you please excuse my abrupt entry? I came out of mere curiosity to see the man whose writings have made so much noise in the world."  
"I am very glad your curiosity is so easily satisfied," said Paine.

Having gazed his fill at Paine, and, apparently, discovering no tell or horns or cloven hoofs or sulphurous fumes about the author of the "Rights of Man," "Common Sense" and "The Age of Reason," the worthy Thorburn withdrew, only to lose his job as psalm singer for some months as the punishment for his reprehensible curiosity.

Miss Best's book is carefully written and she has made an admirable point of orientating Paine in his time, a labor that was much needed. After all, the history of Thomas Paine is the history of his era; he was a part of its thought and a part of its action. He was one of the most widely known men in the Occidental world, for America, Great Britain and France were all intimately concerned with aiding and abetting or confuting his arguments. Although some of his philosophy was caught out of the conflicting currents of the time about him and not precisely from his own cerebration, he was an extreme individualist. Therefore, he stands four-square in Miss Best's book, a dynamic figure pulsating with energy and activity, eager to do mental battle always with his peers, an apostle of the new era, a lover of tolerance, an unwearying fighter for political, social and religious liberty. If there was anything that he was lacking in it appears to be humor, and we may well forgive him for that lapse, since conditions made him serious practically all of his days. He could not look at a corrupt political system with a mocking smile as did Voltaire. His heart and soul were too fiery with dreams of emancipation.